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# From Vietnam to the Persian Gulf; The Decline of Objective Television Media in American War Reporting

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VISIONS OF WAR  
FROM VIETNAM TO THE PERSIAN GULF  
THE DECLINE OF OBJECTIVE TELEVISION MEDIA IN AMERICA

by

Kathleen C. Sprague

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Political Science)

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Media and Democracy.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>War – A Television Media Analysis.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Vietnam.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Introduction.....	9
Containment, Domino Theory Politics and Unclear Objectives–Early 1960’s.....	12
The Role of the Television Journalist in the War.....	17
The Impact of What Americans Were Seeing on Television.....	19
The Tet Offensive–A Shift to Negative Coverage, A Loss of Support At Home.....	21
Thoughts on Vietnam.....	23
<b>The Gulf War.....</b>	<b>26</b>
A Look Back at the 1980’s.....	27
Contradictions – The Media’s Failure to React in the First Days of the Crisis.....	29
Not Another Vietnam – The Role of the Government in Harnessing the Media.....	31
The New Role of the War Correspondent – Friend of the Government.....	35
Welcome to Pool Reporting.....	37
Live – CNN’s War and Reporting in Real Time.....	43
What American’s Were (or Weren’t) Seeing on Television.....	46
Are the Media to Blame?.....	49
Some Final Thoughts on the Gulf War.....	52
Does the American Public Care?.....	54
<b>Televised War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.....</b>	<b>56</b>
Introduction – The Years Following the Gulf War.....	56
9-11-01: A New Era for Television.....	57
The Government, Television, and War: Summer 2002 – Winter 2003.....	60
<b>War with Iraq.....</b>	<b>64</b>
Embedding.....	65
The Positive Side of Embedding.....	67
Negative Aspects of Embedding.....	69
One Last Thought on Embedding.....	72
<b>Iraq the Role of Television.....</b>	<b>73</b>
Criticism in the Press.....	73
Graphic Images in Today’s War.....	75
The Role of Correspondents to Remain Objective.....	77
<b>Objective Success in Television War.....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>85</b>

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## Author’s Biography

## Reading List

*"If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie."*

-Tim O'Brien "The Things They Carried"

Often referred to as the fourth branch of government, our founding fathers gave the press the right to freely report that which they deemed necessary for the public's greater knowledge or scrutiny. The right to report in an objective manner, free from government control, creates a constant flow of information that precipitates the formation of political opinion. An informed public able to question the actions of their leaders is a keystone of American democracy.

Journalists in the United States take great pride in their responsibility to report the news. Never is this clearer than when American armed forces are involved in war, and never is reporting more complicated than when American policies, politics and patriotism are at stake. During wartime, reporters walk a fine line between objectively reporting what is happening thousands of miles from the United States mainland and the patriotic storyline fed to them by government officials at home and on the battlefield.

Media representations of war until the mid-twentieth century were played out in newspaper columns, radio, and still-life photographs. This changed in dramatic fashion when television was introduced into American lives in the early 1950s. Suddenly, American families of all backgrounds, educations and social classes, could see, as well as hear, the current events of the world. This new way

of viewing the world would become a key factor in the way the American public perceived future wars. Today, television is the single greatest information source in American culture.

The Vietnam War was the first televised war in America's history. Overnight, the horror of war was broadcast across television airwaves for all to see. Death and destruction, Vietnam's reality, became embedded in the minds of viewers. Correspondents echoed this reality while also emphasizing the unclear policy objectives of the American government both at home and on the war front. Never before had the public experienced a war like Vietnam. Never before had American politicians experienced such a negative reaction to their actions, as did those who crafted war in the jungles of South East Asia. It was television that drastically changed American perceptions of this war, while providing a primary information source that prompted Americans to call into question the actions of the government.

Two decades after the Vietnam experience, American television media was once again covering an American war, this time in the Persian Gulf. Yet, the government seemingly had learned much from Vietnam. Gone were the reckless war correspondents, so enamored with the search for the truth they leapt into the darkness of live combat armed only with a camera. In their place were pools of war correspondents corralled near bases, away from combat, tightly restricted as to everything they said or filmed on camera. Gone were the coverage of battles, the blood, the gore and the reality of war, in its place were images portraying the mastery of American weaponry. Gone were the tired struggles of battle weary

service men and women; instead their families were broadcast over the airways waving American flags, a perfect picture of American patriotism.

After discussing the obligation of the media to American democracy, this thesis will demonstrate that televised war reporting during the Vietnam Era dramatically affected the way the public perceived the war. The nature of the television images as well as the style of reporting, uncensored by the government during Vietnam, was a crucial factor in the formation of American public opinion about the war. Further, this ability to freely report the realities of the situation was a clear representation of the intended role of a democratic free press.

This thesis will then argue that during the Gulf War, government censorship and the television media's acceptance of the imposed regulations failed the Democratic process by under-informing the American public. The measures taken by the government to lead the media into unquestioning support of the government view denied the American people the ability to gain information from a wide array of perspectives. The public's ability to influence political decisions was impaired by war reporting with a highly controlled pro-government bias.

In conclusion, I will address the current war with Iraq and the implications of a new style of media coverage. Today we find ourselves in media frontiers never imagined forty, or even thirteen, years ago. Real-time reporting, live combat images, and unprecedented access to troops on the front lines, are a few of the aspects that, today, have dramatically changed the way war is viewed on television. This new war raises questions as to the ability of live reporting, sped from the source to viewers almost instantaneously, to truly reach the depth

of quality analysis armed conflict deserves. It also emphasizes continuing questions concerning the obligation of the American media to report war in an objective manner. We see a constant struggle as the television media search for a way to remain appropriately patriotic while reporting to the American public the true realities of war.

### **The Media and Democracy**

In today's world the television media are increasingly the major, if only, information source for millions of Americans. Television has become the main medium from which the American public receives the facts from which opinions are formed and subsequent political decisions are made. George Gerbner cites the role of television in society as "a centralized system of storytelling ...[from which members of the public] share a strong cultural link, a shared daily ritual of highly compelling and informative content (Alger 26)."

Politicians and scholars alike have agreed that "the nature of politically relevant communications sent through the mass media...are central to the conditions under which citizens get information and [are] exposed to the pressure of opinion makers (Alger 10)." The mass media have always been a force in American politics. Their freedom to report all they see and hear is preserved in the Constitution.

Abraham Lincoln stated in his famous Gettysburg Address, that government should be "...of the people, by the people..." With this in mind theorist G.E.G. Catlin noted "Freedom of the press...is a civil liberty under law,

logically justified for the specific purpose of...the development of an objectively informed and intellectually vigorous democracy (Alger 11).” The American Heritage Dictionary defines objectivity as something having “actual existence” and based on “observable phenomena (‘Second College Edition, 473).”

While all reporting may in fact be slightly prejudiced, for human nature dictates that one’s personal beliefs or emotions may at times play into a story that is told, this thesis will define objective reporting as *comprehensive reporting of observable facts and phenomena, unhindered by government censorship imposed in an attempt to blur the truthfulness of a war-time situation*. Objective reporting is a crucial process for American society. Whether personal opinions support or reject government policy should never be an issue in a true democracy.

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Some scholars, as well as many government officials tend to argue towards support of press censorship during wartime. It is reasonable to argue that areas concerning intelligence gathering, military operations and diplomacy require a great deal of secrecy, lest some fact, maneuver, or proposed policy be given away in the media and jeopardize our government or our military personnel. There is also a sizable segment of the country that agrees with government officials and supports the concept that truth is necessarily lost during war.

It is argued that when Americans are involved in military conflict public opinion should support those risking their lives for our country, rather than



question the actions of our government. Many find that there are times to be critical and times to be patriotic. Government officials as well as some in the American public firmly believe that once American troops are engaged in combat the television media should simply step back and allow our military to do their job.

In his media study, *Foreign Affairs News and the Broadcast Journalist*, published in 1975, following the Vietnam War, Robert Batscha comments that “the country has gone through difficult times, and television has found itself to be a major chronicler of the issues...victories...defeats...Many voices have been critical of the medium for disseminating this information, lamenting that the medium’s role has become that of conveyor of information about events that disturb viewers (Batscha 28).”

The government has always been wary of wartime reporting that might foster negative emotions that would elicit a response other than one of full-fledged support in the American public. Following Vietnam, many Washington policy makers agreed that without public support, a sustained conflict engaging the American military could never again be carried out as long as television was there to report in its full capacity. Correspondents themselves oftentimes questioned the degree to which they should be critical of the government. In Batscha’s study he found through interviews with correspondents who had covered Vietnam, that feelings were split nearly 50-50 on whether the press should be critical of government action, or simply report the facts as the government disseminated them (Batscha 39).

Government officials argued during Vietnam and continue to argue today, that the media's tendency to produce images that disturb the American public helps to create an environment of distrust between the government and its people, an environment that is unpatriotic and dangerous during wartime. However, news correspondent Walter Cronkite responded to this theory during the Vietnam War by simply saying, "A newsman of my generation has been able to watch, year after year, the spreading of a tendency among political leaders, to forget what they once knew intellectually, and to react to criticism instead, emotionally. Instead of accepting the newsman and the dissenter as seekers of truth, they more and more have come to believe that the only responsible newsmen are those clearly committed to their [the politician's] cause (Batscha 33)."

Television appears to be here to stay as a source of information in American society. It is possible to report in a straightforward manner the facts of a war without giving away information that would create immediate danger for American troops. There are justifiable cases where troop location, maneuvers, and covert operations would be jeopardized if revealed in the media. However, there are many more stories, such as background pieces, war atrocities, casualty numbers, and difficulties faced by American troops that are simply fair game, disturbing or not.

During times of war, the informative value of television should increase dramatically. For the media to truly remain promoters of informed democratic decision-making, they should establish reasons for government action and policy for the American public. The government must accept the role of a free press, as a

critic, a watchdog and sometimes an adversary. Likewise, if the public is to truly remain informed about war, they must also face the reality of war. If the public is to make decisions based on military actions of our government, they must also be willing to understand the harshness, danger and graphic nature of these actions. There may be an argument for wartime censorship, but the argument for maintaining a free press as a means of fueling the democratic process, even in times of war, is stronger.

### **War - A Television Media Analysis**

Vietnam and the Gulf War represent two very different wars in our modern time. They are connected not in principle, but rather by the mass medium of television. These two wars represent a dramatic change in the way that war has been presented to the American public. The following will examine the obligation of the mass media to be an informative force in modern American democracy as well as the role of television in presenting modern war to the American public. I will first examine the success of the television media in reporting Vietnam from an objective standpoint. I will then address the failure of the media to remain free of government influence and control during the Gulf War.

I will also address the response of the American public to televised war. I will propose that if the television media truly want to retain their role as an informant used in democratic decision-making, they need to reassess their role and rediscover their objectivity. In turn, the American public must be willing to

accept media reporting that may contradict their prior political perceptions. Neither can remain complacent to the government and both must view the world and the politics of American foreign policy attentively with an open mind and responsive opinions.

Finally, I will apply what I have learned from television coverage of Vietnam and the Gulf War to the current war in Iraq. I will address the changes the government has made in their controls to seemingly give reporters a greater ability to report the war objectively, and I will assess whether television has chosen to do so. This final section will examine the forever-changing trends in media coverage and hypothesize on the effects of today's coverage on American perceptions of this new war.

## **Vietnam**

### *Introduction*

In this section, I will examine the role that television played during the Vietnam War and how the televised portrayal of the war affected the perceptions of the American public. The manner in which journalists reported Vietnam remained true to the concept of a free press in American Democracy. Journalists, following the pursuit of objective reporting, were able to present the war to the American public in its full, and many times brutal, reality. Network executives allowed the graphic nature of the war onto the airways, and the government did not censor the reports. The public, in turn was able to see the war as it was happening and make individual as well as collective decisions concerning

American involvement in South East Asia. The ability of the public to perceive the actions of the government and formulate political decisions based on uncensored information from the press is democracy in its greatest sense.

To many Americans, Vietnam is a war not a country. It reminds our collective memory of a time we would rather forget, a time when too many American lives were lost in a horrific and questionable conflict. As the first televised war in American history, Vietnam is engraved in the minds of the generation that were the first to experience this phenomenon.

Television is unique in its ability to standardize, streamline, amplify, and share what it portrays with viewers (Weimann 8). For those watching Vietnam unfold in front of them, the war and the politics all converged on a screen that depicted the realities of war and at times the unrealities of the situation. The repercussions of this televised war are still apparent in media and political influences today.

One of the greatest impacts of television was that the message conveyed by cameras and correspondents from the field furthered the common belief that what we see on a television is “believable,” “a picture is worth a thousand words” and that “cameras never lie.” The images that television can convey are unlike any that writers are able to portray through news articles. These images lend television a quality for delivering truth and understanding to all who watch it. It would take much longer for the American public to realize that at times “it is the inability of television to provide a full picture of the context and complexities of diplomacy that makes it erratic and unpredictable (Taylor 75-77).”

Walter Lipmann made the presumption that people often act not on the basis of actual facts and events, but on the basis of what they think is the real situation, as they perceived it from the press (Weimann 3). During the Vietnam War, this assumption proved to be one of the greatest obstacles to garnering public support for the war.

During the Vietnam era, the information the public received from the media was oftentimes different from the information that the Presidential administrations were advancing to them. Thus, while the government floundered to find a clear objective for the war, television portrayed realities that greatly influenced Americans' perceptions of what was happening. This would prove catastrophic for the government as this reality of war became increasingly clear to the public, while the reasoning behind war in Vietnam became less and less understandable.

The ultimate influence of television during Vietnam can be realized in the fact that "mass media forced attention to certain issues. They built up public images of political figures. They constantly presented images suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about and have feelings about (Weimann 33)." During the Vietnam War, the media were able to report, for the first time ever, free from government control - uncensored.

Many correspondents were stationed in Saigon in bureaus their networks had set up for them. They were allowed access to troops; allowed to go into the field, to film combat, and to openly talk to soldiers about what was happening. Reports were filed directly with networks and the "Televised Vietnam" was sent over the airways to the American public. This ability to report directly to the

public was one of many factors that shaped Vietnam into the war it was.

Television created the tension between the government and the American public as reporters portrayed war with brutal actuality – primetime, for all Americans to see and judge for themselves.

### *Containment, Domino Theory Politics and Unclear Objectives - The Early 1960s*

During the 1950s the United States was heavily involved in policies that revolved around the objective of promoting capitalist democracies while putting down communist governments throughout the world. Since the end of World War II, the United States government had practiced a policy of containment. Containment was backed by the 1947 Truman Doctrine, which challenged Congress to provide at-risk countries, such as those in South East Asia, with economic aid in the hopes of keeping Soviet and Chinese communism from spreading southward (Gettleman 46).

As American hopes of global capitalism progressed throughout the 1950s, American policy makers worried that if a communist revolution was successful in toppling the government of South Vietnam, it would have a ripple effect not only in the rest of Southeast Asia, but in Latin America and Africa as well (Hearden 177). Known as the Domino Theory, adherence to a policy that would prevent this ripple effect would become the keystone to our future involvement in Vietnam the basis of our military action and, as time went by, an excuse to remain.

The fear that Indochina would fall victim to communism prompted America to take special interest in the region and following the Geneva Peace

Agreements in 1954 (Gettleman 74) America took up a presence in Vietnam, leaping into the role of “protector of South East Asia.” Thus, decisions were made early to dispatch American military units to Vietnam, in order to secure “national” interests, as well as to aid the “democratic government” of South Vietnam against the incursions of the communist North. Initial American involvement in Vietnam, during the early 1960s, consisted of military aid and equipment without the presence of American military personnel. President Kennedy, for the short duration of his administration, sought to keep government policies in South East Asia out of the news, wary of an American public who weren’t supportive of involving American troops in military action abroad.

As an issue of foreign policy the press corps played down Vietnam due to the respect they held for the President (Hallin 29). This ability for the President to somewhat control the mass media in the early 1960s was due to a positive relationship between the President and the media. Executive control over foreign affairs was based on the ideology of the Cold War that dictated bipartisan support for foreign policy in order to protect and promote national security (Hallin 24). Reporters held a deep respect for the men who were leading our nation through the perils of the Cold War. Thus, Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy were able to wield incredible control over foreign affairs reporting during this time.

During early American involvement in South East Asia, the press stuck close to the official line given to them by the government. They promoted the Cold War Domino Theory, and used this to reduce the complexity of South East Asia and relate far off stories to the public by simply saying that securing South



East Asia was “important (Hallin 49).” However, journalists were increasingly recognizing their ability to report objectively, as well as the public’s thirst for this kind of reporting. The media, particularly television media were progressively more aware of the fact they were privately “owned and operated” institutions and were by no means bound to government control when it came to what they chose to report (Hallin 20).

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Americans easily saw the aggression of communism against capitalism in Vietnam. However, journalists failed miserably to explain the deeply complicated political aspects of the Vietnam conflict, and the political dimensions of a people who never did conform to American policy objectives, including the institution of a capitalist democracy (Hallin 56). As journalists themselves struggled to understand the extremely complex politics of Vietnam, the American government struggled to define a clear policy of our role in the conflict.

Increased attacks by communists on American interests in the South prompted President Johnson to send American ground troops to Vietnam in the summer of 1965. With this momentous decision, “President Johnson...therefore determined that the United States [would] deploy whatever force level...required to prevent the fall of the South Vietnam domino (Hearden 133).” The Johnson administration understood that with the introduction of ground troops and increasing conflicts involving American forces they would have to step up the effort to “control the news.”

The reasoning behind the massive degree of news management was due to attempts by the Johnson administration to give the impression of “continuity and

inevitability” that would make each new step of involvement seem as though there was no change in government policy, that everything was going as planned and expected and therefore no need for public discussion at home (Hallin 62). The introduction of large numbers of American ground troops changed the conflict in the minds of Americans. This increase in involvement prompted television networks to find coverage dramatic enough to start including it in nightly news programming (Hallin 115).

Television images of “our American boys” flying off to save the world from communism brought Vietnam closer to home. In the first years of American fighting, television media continued to support the government policy. This early support was partly due to the concentrated effort by Johnson’s foreign policy team to portray the Viet Cong of the North as terrorists, and American soldiers as the saviors of South Vietnam from the terrorism of communism (Hallin 157). They continued for some time to portray the communist forces as a “manifestation of Cold War threats...shadowy figures [in television news]; nothing was said about their history, organization or policies...militant communists who sought to take over South Vietnam...terrorists who lived comfortably, dominating the countryside (Hallin 56).”

As the conflict raged on, it became clear to journalists reporting from Vietnam that American policy was not working as officials had expected. For all the time spent by the government on producing policy to justify our actions in Vietnam, the “American War” was not going as well or as quickly as planned. While the government continued to wade through policy that would try to keep the war as limited as possible, journalists continued to try to justify American

combat in Vietnam because they were still deeply committed to the anti-communist cause in South East Asia. However, some correspondents began to doubt the merits of military escalation as they saw, first hand, the brutality of the war and the complex political situation between North and South Vietnam. Thus, by the mid to late 1960s there was an increase in journalistic independence fed by a lack of cohesive leadership and explanation coming from the White House (Hallin 83).

During the early days of the war, television correspondents focused much on the role of the American soldier through interviews, and occasional combat coverage ([www.danford.net](http://www.danford.net)). However, by the summer of 1967 over 13,000 Americans had died in Vietnam. The government was still fighting a war that was not officially “declared,” and journalists caught on to disagreements within the administration and began reporting stories that at times were unsupportive of government goals.

As the role of television increased, the war hit home for Americans on a nightly basis. By the fall of 1967, over 90 percent of the evening news was devoted to the war, and roughly 50 million Americans were watching each night (Bonior 4). The lack of government press censorship during the war allowed for correspondents to follow soldiers into combat. As journalists saw increasingly bloody and horrifying combat, the public began seeing more graphic images on their televisions. This, coupled with the lack of progress that was being made by the government toward ending the war, caused the American public to increasingly question the reasons for our involvement.

## *The Role of the Television Journalist in the War*

Most important to understanding the nature of public reaction to Vietnam is an understanding of the role the television correspondent played during the war and how this role changed the nature of American war reporting. The framing of the war as a “political issue” rather than extending a formal declaration of war from one Presidential administration to the next made it impossible for the executive branch to impose “war time” censorship on the media.

Politicians in Washington refused to acknowledge the full depth of American involvement in Vietnam. At war for nearly ten years, in what was termed, a “limited” engagement, the administration had no basis for imposing press restrictions on the basis of “national security” as they had in past wars. A nation not at war could not have their national security compromised by a media that might report sensitive information to the enemy. If there was no war, it was hard to define an enemy. Washington’s hesitation to call Vietnam a full-fledged “war” allowed the press the freedom to present the war objectively for the first time in history (Rather 2).

In addition, the growth and improvement of the television industry during the 1950s and 1960s would prove revolutionary in the way that a war could be reported. News agencies set up operations in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, early on. This proximity to the conflict allowed television reporters almost constant access to soldiers involved in conflict. Away from the United States, a new breed of reporter was born. Motivated by a mixture of ego, pride

and sense of duty, journalists took it upon themselves to report the war as they saw it, to become the voice as well as the eyes of the combat soldier. Television was the journalist's greatest tool and became a gateway for Americans to experience the war directly from the source, rather than through carefully orchestrated government reports.

The intensity of the visual images that television was able to bring into American living rooms helped to explain the complexities of war to Americans who did not fully understand the government jargon often times printed in the newspapers sources of the time. The reporters and the anchors that narrated "television Vietnam" quickly became known in households throughout American. The American public tuned in to their trusted nightly news anchors for the events of the day (Hallin 106). In addition, because the war went on and on, Americans could develop their feelings and emotions about the conflict processing them over time as they watched on television.

The trust that television reporters were able to create between them and the American public allowed the correspondents to influence the way the American public was viewing the war. The lack of credible information coming from the government, and the lack of clarity in policy when it was shared, turned Americans towards television and the sometimes critical editorials by reporters, for what they felt was the more accurate portrayal of what was really happening in Vietnam. Journalists willingly took on the role of explaining American involvement in Vietnam to Americans in place of the government (Hallin 85).

## *The Impact of What Americans Were Seeing On Television*

One of the most lasting impacts of a televised war was the fact that Americans saw on television a detailed account of the war, in-your-face images, and exciting stories that were used to gain the attention of viewers night after night. The lack of understanding among the American public in regards to the politics of Vietnam would take years to explain, comprehend and accept. Even then, it was the living imagery of the war that cemented a constant reminder of what was wrong about the conflict to those who witnessed it.

For nearly a decade, the American public could turn on their televisions and watch soldiers dying, villages burning, and body bags arriving back in the states. During the 1960s, the American public saw television as their most important source of information. Politicians saw it increasingly as the most important factor in impacting public opinion. During the Korean War, in the early 1950s, only 9% of American households had a television, by 1966 close to 93% had access to television on a nightly basis (Bonior 18).

The impact of television viewership can be seen through a survey the Roper Organization conducted during the height of American involvement from 1964-1972. Respondents were allowed *multiple* answers to the question “from which medium did they get most of their news”. In 1964, 58% said television, while 56% said newspapers. By 1972, over 64% responded that television was their primary source, while only 50% relied on newspapers (Hallin 106).

In the early years of Vietnam, journalists tried to portray the war in a framework that was understandable and acceptable to the American public. Over

half of the coverage in the first years was devoted to military operations, with the rest focusing on politics, policy and diplomacy (Hallin 114). Once a war is underway, many times political purposes are taken for granted as the public becomes focused on winning the conflict. For many Americans winning wars is a national tradition. Until Vietnam we had never lost a war. This national endeavor taken on by our troops must be supported. It is unquestioning public support for our military and unquestioning patriotism during wartime that adds a sense of rationality to the fight. However, as the Vietnam War progressed, the rationality of this war faded into a fog of irrational confusion-a war without any fixed objectives or end in sight (Hallin 142).

The closeness of the camera magnified the impact that coverage of combat had on Americans at home. As CBS correspondent Morey Safer explained, "The camera can describe in excruciating, harrowing detail, what war is all about, the cry of pain, the shattered fact-it's all there on film, and out it goes into millions of American homes during the dinner hour (Seib 16-17)." It is during these later years that American public opinion began to turn against the government. Television had shown its incredible ability to create a bond of trust between the public and those reporting a story; it had generated a mass public perception of what was going on, and going wrong, in Vietnam.

The changing tide of American opinion corresponded with the shift to negativity the press experienced in period following the Tet Offensive in 1968. Television showed human suffering and the sacrifice of war at its worst. "Whatever the intention behind the relentless and literal reporting of the war, the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the

question [in the end] of whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity, strength and purpose at home (Hallin 3).”

### *The Tet Offensive - A Shift to Negative Coverage, and Loss of Support At Home*

In January of 1968, communist forces from North Vietnam swept into the cities of the south in an attempt to incite an urban uprising. By this point in time, North Vietnam had already won most of the countryside and felt one final push into the cities would seal victory. However, what became known as the Tet Offensive, turned into a military disaster for the North, whose forces were unable to take the cities in the South at the cost of many lives (Hearden 146).

In the United States an actual victory for American forces was portrayed as a brutal loss on television. The media exposed, through their reporting, the failures of the American War: the inability to prevent the North from further incursions, the inability to gain complete control of the country-side, and the inability to gain full fledged support from the people of South Vietnam. Without backup from the government to contradict all that was being said by anchors on television, the credibility gap widened between the public and government officials.

After the Tet Offensive, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, the “most trusted man in America,” editorialized the situation in Vietnam for the American people concluding in a television special following the Tet Offensive that: “To say we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence and the optimists



who have been wrong in the past. To say that we are mired in a bloody stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory conclusion (Hallin 170).”

Following Cronkite’s statement, television coverage turned predominately negative, as news anchors increased their own critical editorials of the conflict from 5% pre-Tet to close to 20% after the shift to negativity (Hallin 170). In addition, stories that focused on the morale of U.S. troops shifted drastically from positive to negative. Pre-Tet, CBS had done 4.0 stories weekly focused on positive troop morale, and zero stories on negative morale. After Tet there were 2.5 positive stories weekly and 14.5 stories focusing on negative troop morale (Hallin 180).

As the government grasped for a solution to Vietnam, the American public increasingly became discontented with any sort of involvement in the region. In correlation with growing frustration and anger, Americans were getting an unusually graphic dose of Vietnam on television. The level of violence in televised stories was considerably higher during the 1968 Tet-Period (Seib 16). Film clips of casualties increased from a pre-Tet 2.4 times a week to 6.8 times a week (Hallin 171).

The Tet-offensive officially marked the turn to negative coverage in televised Vietnam. By the time Richard Nixon took office in 1969, brutal images of combat fighting, anti-war protests at home, as well as critical editorials by network reporters on the war we were losing, had swayed the American public even more against the war. As Nixon embarked on his Presidential career, the administration still lacked a coherent strategy. It seemed there was no clear objective, other than not losing the war. It was increasingly easy for television

correspondents to contradict the Department of Defense's positive view of the war, considering DOD spokesmen could not define for the public what "success" in Vietnam constituted, nor what it would require (Seib 16).

The lack of effective presentation by the government had given television reporters the ability to latch onto the frustration the leaders were experiencing in private; frustration about the length of the war, the lack of success in strategy, and the seemingly never-ending list of those killed in action. Because of this frustration, and in later years lack of agreement on the best course of action, the media was able to portray Vietnam for what it was, rather than what the government wanted it to be.

In the end, the dynamics of how war was presented to the public had changed. An uncensored, televised war made it hard for the government to retain public support in light of unclear policy and failed objectives (Hallin 3). Ultimately, Americans had depended on television to explain Vietnam to them when politicians could not. However, the death, horror and graphic violence they saw each night seemed irrational in light of no solidified explanation by the government. It is no wonder that public support declined as the war moved slowly to its unsatisfying conclusion.

### *Thoughts on Vietnam*

It is not fair to say that television was able to single handedly sway American public opinion against the war, nor is it fair to say that the United States government was wrong in attempting to resolve the conflict in South East

Asia with force. However, it can be said that the introduction of televised war affected American perceptions of war in ways that are still being realized today.

While studying the effects of television during Vietnam, one must consider the relationship between the mass media and the government in the United States. Foreign policy debates covered by the media generally depended on the insights of government officials who could give reporters the “inside scoop.” Few individuals outside of Washington had a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy. Reporters were forced to look towards administration officials if they wanted quotes, interviews and credible analysis on what is happening overseas (Mermin 27).

In studying Vietnam, we must remember that while television may have served ‘as a catalyst for foreign policy’ it only had a major effect on public perception and government response after officials in Washington also began to disagree about the level of involvement and the methods of solving the conflict (Taylor 93). Pre-Tet, government officials stuck closely to the Cold War ideology of the Domino Theory and the belief that “saving” South Vietnam was essential in saving the world from communism. After Tet officials in Washington began to sharply disagree as to the best course for the remainder of the war. This is evidenced in the television media by the shift to predominantly negative coverage after the Tet Offensive.

The media succeeded in reporting Vietnam due to their freedom. The American public was given a portrayal of war that they had never seen before, and were able to judge for themselves if it was a just or unjust war. The American government often times contradicted media representations of the war, policy

was weak and ultimately the power of television succeeded in convincing the American public the war was going badly enough to need an end, unsatisfying as it may have been.

After the American television media presented the Tet-Offensive of 1968 as a military failure and anchors deemed the war a “lost cause” American public opinion turned. The public reacted with disgust and anger towards the government, as they continued to vicariously experience the destruction of war night after night. Following the shift towards negativity, the government was forced to reassess its role in Vietnam and eventually acknowledge protest and angst at home. Government policy was never successful, and the war was never won - it simply ended.

There is no doubt that Vietnam was a tragedy for America. Once involved in Vietnam, it was clear that then current United States policy would not work in that arena. It was the stubbornness of US officials and the wrong policy that prolonged the war for almost fifteen years. Television introduced America to the realities of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare, and to horrific effects that misguided policy can have on American lives. Americans supported, and then contradicted a government that continuously lacked a coherent strategy. Journalists took the opportunity to report uncensored, to editorialize war, present graphic depictions of American involvement and give millions of Americans a new medium through which they could come to a personal opinion.

If we are to believe that full access to information is a “cardinal principle of the democratic system (Alger 10)” then the access the media ultimately found during the Vietnam period was successful at giving Americans the information

they needed to make informed personal decisions about what their leaders were doing. It was during the later years of the war that the media came into their own, objectively looking at the situation before them, informing the public of what they believed was truth, whether the government approved or not. The public in turn, protested in word and action against the war the media had portrayed.

The media, by questioning the lack of clarity in government policy and picking up on negativity as the war progressed, were able to assist in providing information critical to changing tide of public opinion. While not the only means by which American opinion was shaped during the 1960s and early 1970s, television introduced Americans to war in a way so striking that they could not help but be moved by the images they watched.

Today, televised Vietnam remains a benchmark against which all American war reporting since that time has been measured. Much lay ahead of the generation of Vietnam and much would change between government and television before another war would be broadcast across the airwaves. In the next televised war, objective reporting would not prevail so easily; in fact it would be compromised in a way that the media could not have imagined during Vietnam.

## **The Gulf War**

In modern day America, the media, particularly the television media serve to objectively inform the public in hope that expanded knowledge will enhance individual ability to make decisions. This is the essence of democracy and the foundation of democratic debate. The manner in which journalists reported the

Gulf War failed American democracy by creating an illusion of the realities of war. Government censorship, as well as media acceptance of wartime reporting regulations, created a television environment that denied the American public the ability to gain objective information. During the Gulf War, the lack of uncensored information seen on television made it impossible for the public to formulate educated political decisions. The press failed their constitutional right to report freely by accepting government censorship and reporting a patriotic, pro-government storyline. In this section I will examine the role that television played during the Gulf War and how the portrayal of the war affected the perceptions of the American public.

### *A Look Back at the 1980s*

In the decades following Vietnam, the United States government, in effect, sought to control the media when it came to foreign affairs. While Vietnam was a success from the standpoint of journalistic openness, the government viewed the entire war as disastrous in light of the fact that the failure of government policy was played out on televisions across America for all to judge. During Vietnam, a dramatic shift had taken place between the American public and the government. In part due to television reporting, the American public was increasingly wary of government action in foreign affairs. This would change drastically throughout the 1980s due to a concerted effort by the military and government to censor the media, and would reach its apex during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf conflict and subsequent war.

For government officials, the years following Vietnam were tumultuous. Many continued to question the active and critical role television media had played in the conflict, and Vietnam continued to haunt those in charge of crafting American foreign policy. The government thinking that emerged during the post Vietnam era was that the American public was under informed as to the politics that drove the Cold War and ill equipped to make decisions concerning affairs abroad. Many conservatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s believed it best that the public be kept in the dark when it came to continuing Cold War foreign policy. It would be better for the government to judge the interests of the nation than to re-ignite public debate and protest over the challenges of foreign policy (Herman 3).

During the 1980s, the United States government invaded Grenada and Panama. In both cases media coverage was less than impressive. Government imposed restrictions on media access to both conflict zones compromised the scope of reporting. Coverage was minimal and did not raise much public awareness to the causes or affects of either military incursion. The government passed the invasions off as necessary to protect American citizens but it was really to protect Cold War American interests. The failure of the media to react to government restrictions with more aggressive investigation and reporting did not set good precedent for coverage of subsequent conflicts. Following government success in keeping the media at bay during the conflicts of the 1980s, the tide was appearing to turn in the relationship between the government and the mass media (Herman 6).

It can be argued that small-scale military operations in the 1980s did not give the media enough time to formulate an objective message to be sent to the American public. This may be especially true if we accept that during the early 1980s the impacts of an oil crisis in the 1970s, and continued economic problems at home seemed much more pressing to the American public than “small” foreign affairs issues that never truly made it big in the world of television media. The chance for the media to redeem its objective qualities would come during 1990 with the beginnings of the crisis in the Persian Gulf. However, the lack of true reporting during the conflicts in the 1980s simply foreshadowed what was to come.

#### *Contradictions – The Media’s Failure to React In the First Days of the Crisis*

American policy of the 1980s was riddled with contradictions and double standards. The Reagan-Bush policy of “quiet diplomacy” and “constructive engagement” involved the United States in struggles around the world, struggles the media rarely picked up on, much less covered. Reagan-Bush policy simply continued past government policies that had so often been taken on through covert operations and shadowy inner policy moves hidden from mainstream media, and American public scrutiny (Herman 7).

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, the Bush Administration attempted to negotiate with Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait in a manner that would prevent military action. The Administration had ignored CIA warnings earlier in the summer indicating Iraq was preparing to invade. In addition, for



years the Reagan and Bush Administrations had been supportive of Iraqi aggression towards Iran in the 1980s (Herman 7).

Another major contradiction in President Bush's policy was his insistence that he would not stand for the "naked aggression" Iraq imposed on Kuwait. In most simple terms, Iraq invaded Kuwait after repeated disputes over their shared border and the oil that lay in Southern Iraq. The government of Iraq believed Kuwait to be stealing oil from the Southern Iraqi oil fields, creating economic problems for the Iraqi regime. It is fair to say that in the mind of Saddam Hussein part of the reason he invaded was to protect national interest. Some might argue that likewise, in 1989, the United States had unilaterally invaded Panama to "protect American lives" from drug-trafficking, even though this action, taken to protect the interests of the United States and her people violated the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

Therefore, when the invasion of Kuwait occurred, the Administration believed that the fact they had similarly invaded Panama the year before, ignored warnings of Iraq's invasion plan, and had knowledge the prior Administration had supported Iraq for nearly a decade, all needed to be kept out of the media (Herman 5). The Bush Administration fought to harness media attention towards Saddam Hussein and the atrocities his regime had imposed on his own people rather than answer questions about America's past politics.

A lack of media attention to foreign affairs in the 1980s due to governmental constraints, domestic issues, and lack of aggressive reporting, gave the Bush administration the power it needed to use the media, in particularly television media, to its advantage in building up support for a war against Iraq.

Had the media called into question, consistently and strongly, the contradictory policies of the Bush Administration, the government would have been hard pressed to manipulate the way the Gulf War was covered from the onset.

One of the first actions of the Bush Administration following the invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 was to place a large United States force in the Gulf Region. After the government had played up a “rumor” that Iraq was to invade Saudi Arabia, one of the United States’ strongest allies in the region, the media took sides with the Administration’s line that troop buildup was necessary to protect American interests. Following the elections in November of 1990, Bush enlarged the military operation in the Gulf once again, and the media had a major story on which to focus (Herman 7).

The large amount of resources and personnel sent to the Gulf during the last months of 1990, as well as the spinning of the story by the Administration at home, led the media to spend a large amount of time and resources “exploring military deployments, possible scenarios of war and the conditions of U.S. soldiers. This not only diverted attention from the real issues but also readied the public for war (Herman 8).”

### *Not Another Vietnam – The Role of the Government In Harnessing the Media*

The experience of Vietnam opened the eyes of those in the military establishment, to the ability of television to sway public perceptions of conflict. In the years following Vietnam, war colleges began to train officers to become media savvy (Weimann 284). It was recognized that to win a war in today’s world, the

government not only had to win on the battlefield, but it had to win in the minds of the American public. "Put another way; when the government has to win, it also have to explain why it has to win (Greenburg 36)."

The military needed television to build and sustain public support for a war. The actions of the military to manipulate the media into covering actions in a positive light, government officials believed, would help promote and support whatever the eventual military solution to the crisis (Weimann 284). The Bush Administration's foreign policy advisors believed that American foreign policy, in the minds of the American people, is a form of "moral pragmatism." Justifying their actions by framing their policy as "saving American lives," or "saving democracy," the administration was out to "set things right" and promote American objectives with the support of the American public who believed these objectives to be acceptable reasons to become involved in conflict (Hastedt 37).

During the build up to the Gulf War, the Bush Administration rightly concluded that the easiest way to limit the influence of the media on the questioning minds of the American public was to enunciate a clear policy. As evidenced by Vietnam, failure to present clear policy objectives leads to more questioning by the television media (Hastedt 129). President Bush took control early on, using censorship procedures such as preventing media access to the war zone. Other times he used outright deception, such as fostering "rumors" that Saddam Hussein was bombing hospitals, all to influence the way that news organizations covered how he responded to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and his particular leadership in the war that followed (Seib 49).

One tactic used by the Bush Administration was to use a war of words to focus media attention negatively on Iraq and thus inform the public that we were fighting a “morally just” war. In the words of President Bush, Saddam Hussein was “brutal,” “dictatorial,” “merciless,” “savage,” and “evil.” While these representations may have been accurate, the repetition of these words on nightly news programs focused American attention on a single individual rather than on the entire nation of Iraq. This man that was the embodiment of the “problem” in the Middle East, as well as the leader of an aggressor nation (Greenburg 62). Little was said about the Iraqi people, politics, or history of the regime that lived under the “merciless savage.”

While the American public was being saturated with words portraying Iraq as the cradle of evil, the Bush Administration was ever wary of the possibility of military casualties in the face of all out war. According to Bush, this war was not going to be a repeat of Vietnam. It would be fought with a minimum number of military casualties, for fear of undermining the support of the American public (Taylor 133). Not knowing how long the war might be, the Administration did not want the nightly news to show a stream of caskets coming home. Early on, one of the first press restrictions was to ban showing images of caskets arriving home to American military bases (Seib 56). Journalist Sydney Schanberg called this part of the government policy a “concerted attempt to try to edit out all reminders of Vietnam (Seib 57).”

In the end, the government pushed to place “negativity” on the side of Iraq and the positive capability to save the world from Saddam’s evil on the side of America. This led to three ultimate dichotomies. They were: “defense on our side

vs. aggression on their side, rationality on our side vs. irrationality on their side, and freedom on our side vs. force on their side.” The declaration that this would “not be another Vietnam” helped in some way to “alleviate collective guilt about the Vietnam war” and further assure the American public that they would not face any “post war guilt” this time around (Greenburg 63).

Once the war started, the Bush Administration carefully played the Vietnam card for the public as an assurance that we would fight “right” this time. This desertion began to shift media attention to areas the government found acceptable. The government chose to focus on military hardware and advanced technology early on, rather than bring the media into a policy debate, fearing media investigation into policy decisions would dig up past blunders that would hurt government objectives.

As the war began “...the duel between Saddam Hussein’s Scud Ballistic Missiles and President Bush’s Patriot missiles creating an interactive dialogue of images, which fit precisely the credible news frame (Setch 16).” The world was able to watch as Patriot interceptors dramatically destroyed Saddam’s Scuds. President Bush claimed success for nearly all Patriot missiles over the lowly Scud. The use of images (the *Patriot* missile) and precise wording by the government helped to reinforce the good versus evil dichotomy. In addition, images of missiles hitting precise targets without killing hundreds were broadcast across America for the public to view, helping millions conceptualize a new kind of war using weaponry that in any other light may have seemed impossibly hard to understand (Stech 6).

### *The New Role of the War Correspondent – Friend of the Government*

The Bush Administration drew the media increasingly close as it became evident America was going to war. While troops continued to amass in the Gulf, the build up of the American press corps was monitored tightly. Preparations for dealing with the press went far beyond anything the government had ever done previously (Seib 53).

When it came to news management and control, there were four basic principles that guided the military and government during the Gulf War. All four aspects sought to limit the scope of the media, while in turn guiding them to present American involvement in a positive light. First, there was total military control of reporters near the general battle regions. Second, the media was restricted to pools guided by military personnel. Third, all news stories had to be submitted to military censors. Fourth, the lack of battle coverage was replaced with Pentagon tapes of military hardware such as fighter jets and laser guided bombs that aired on networks continuously.

The major media controls were instituted before the war began and were written into agreements that major news executives signed in order to gain access to the war zone (Alger 253). While reporters often expressed frustration once in the war zone, the desire for their employers to avoid criticism from the government that might jeopardize all ability to report the war won out. In the end, journalists were faced with the government version of the war, if they wished to report it at all (Allen 38).

From the beginning, the Gulf War television coverage was shaping up to be a government run operation. The restrictions and control would inhibit the media's capacity to report information that could give the American public the ability to objectively view the war and decide for themselves, as well as for American democracy, if it were a just war. For many journalists, the Gulf War would be the biggest story of their lifetime. However, once reporting from the war zone, the government censorship they faced seriously undermined their ability to report objectively. Always under the watchful eye of the American military and government censors, correspondents found themselves attempting to draw a line between "patriotism and the pursuit of journalism (Kulman 1)."

Perhaps two of the most striking differences between television coverage of the Gulf War and coverage of previous wars was the lack of editorials, and the lack of colorful images that were broadcast. Due to government restrictions, television images were often times cut and dried military video images (Greenburg 31). In addition to images, the language that accompanied streaming video was cut and dried, many times simply taken from military briefings. There was little critical analysis as to the merits of American actions flowing from broadcasters as they viewed the war through government eyes along with America ("Economist" 1).

The lack of critical media coverage found on mainstream news programs is evidence of a declining objectivity in television reporting. In studies done using ABC World News Tonight's Gulf Crisis coverage, Jonathan Mermin found that the percentage of critical [against the conflict] paragraphs in news transcripts during this time was dismal. During August, ABC transcripts contained 856

paragraphs concerning the Gulf Crisis of which only 3 were critical, 0.4%. During November, at the height of Bush's troop deployment, ABC had a total of 344 paragraphs concerning the Gulf Crisis, of which only 21, or 6.1% were critical (Mermin 73).

The focus of television war had dramatically shifted. The lesson learned from Vietnam in the eyes of the government was that the result of uncensored reporting might not be to their liking and had the potential to greatly disadvantage them in the long run (Stech 11). The goal of the government in the Persian Gulf was to convey the image of a "clean war." There would be a minimum of images showing human suffering and throughout the war the portrayal of the way the government was handling the war, would focus on complete control (Herman 8).

### *Welcome to Pool Reporting*

The main government control on the media, during the Gulf War was the institution of pool reporting. In the concept of pool reporting, journalists were assigned into groups along with other journalists from various media outlets. Once assigned to their pool journalists found themselves under the orders of military commanders who allowed them access to bases and various military operations. At the mercy of American military persons, journalists often times did not have the resources or ability to choose the stories they reported from the war front.



This media management tool allowed the government an almost unhampered ability to “spin” unfolding events in one area, while in others preventing media access all together (Hastedt 128). The empty deserts of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, as well as the vast distances of hostile land to be covered by troops in this particular war, were instrumental in keeping the press at the mercy of the military and helpful in the success of government pooling (Benjamin 1).

The first test of a pool type reporting system for the American government had occurred in Panama in 1989. The pool of reporters allowed into the country, were kept on an American military base in the interest of personal “security.” They were shown the Panama Canal, and released a day later after most of the fighting was already over. The negativity expressed by the press for this system elicited a response from the Department of Defense that the next time they would “do better (Benjamin 2).”

The way pool reporting worked in the Gulf was that each pool was assigned a specialist from print, photography, radio and television. They were escorted to American bases, as well as to view American combat operations. Pool reports were finished by all four specialists and brought back to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia where they were censored by both the Saudi and American governments. Once censored, the reports were handed out to other media participants in the area.

There were limited positions in the pools, and while journalists from each of the four specialty branches assigned correspondents to the pools, the Department of Defense assigned the area the pool would subsequently cover. Journalists not assigned had to rely on daily briefings back in Dhahran. The pools

also served to limit the access of international media to United States forces. Only one slot was given to a non-American entity, to the Saudi's, who represented the entire contingent of international press. The result was international coverage that relied heavily on the censored pro-American media sources (Benjamin 3).

The Gulf War saw unprecedented coverage by the press. At the onset of the war there were 1600 journalists in Saudi Arabia. Of this 1600 only 400 were assigned to report fighting during the ground war. Therefore, for 1200 other journalists the press pools hampered their ability to report quality news stories. The complaints filed by journalists not covering the fighting as well as those who were covering combat prompted the Department of Defense to once again issue a statement they would "do better" next time, and the pool process went under review following the war (Benjamin 2).

Under review or not, the pool reporting of the Gulf War was a substantial barrier to media access. Below is a chart listing the conditions that reporters were expected to meet while reporting in Saudi Arabia; failure to adhere to the guidelines meant the journalists, along with their crew would be expelled from Saudi Arabia and lose the story. While some guidelines are clearly set to preserve the safety of troops in mid-mission, one might wonder what is left to report about the American military operation in Iraq if all the guidelines are followed.

### **Formal Censorship Procedures**

#### **Gulf War**

- No mention could be made of the specific number of troops, planes supplies etc.  
Only general terms could be used to describe the forces available

- No mention could be made of future plans
- Reporters could not mention the specific location of units
- The rules of engagement, the rules of specifying under what conditions Coalition forces would use force, were off limits
- Intelligence gathering operations and collection activities could not be mentioned
- While an operation was in progress, specific information on friendly troop movements was not allowed
- The points of origin of aircraft flying missions could not be mentioned
- Information on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of enemy military measures could not be mentioned
- Identifying information on missing or downed aircraft or ships while search and rescue operations were underway was prohibited.
- Special operations forces' methods, equipment or tactics could not be mentioned
- Operating methods or tactics in general were off limits
- Operational and support vulnerabilities could not be mentioned until the information was released by Central Command

Taken From "Censorship in the Gulf" by David Benjamin

One of the most controversial government requirements according to pool reporters was the insistence that pools must stay with a public affairs escort on all Saudi bases and at the will of the commander at any U.S. base. This severely restricted any access correspondents had to the combat area and troops that were involved in combat missions. In addition, many escorts took it upon themselves to censor the reports. If they made it off base intact, all pool reports had to be

filed with the Joint Information Bureau in Dhahran Saudi Arabia where they came under the scrutiny of government censors (Benjamin 3).

Some might question why the press needed to participate in the pool system at all during the Gulf War. While the barriers to access were high in pool reporting, they were nearly impossible to get past if journalists were not connected with the United States government. Before the invasion of Kuwait there were no American reporters in Saudi Arabia; it was only with a great deal of persuasion on the part of the U.S. government were reporters allowed into the country in the first place. Secondly, the United States government stated early on, that reporters who found themselves caught in combat zones, on bases, or simply trapped by the cultural differences in the country without an official government escort would not be helped (Benjamin 4).

Reporters belonged to the pool system not because they wanted to, but due to necessity. Exceptions were those reporters allowed inside Iraq. Before the war started major American networks and several international ones including the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had small teams of correspondents located in Baghdad. After the war started a team of three CNN reporters, as well as a producer and camera crew were the only media allowed to stay by the Iraqi government, American or international (Weiner 3).

The ability of the government to pool reporters and restrict their access to operations in the Gulf as well as the length of time it took for stories to pass through censors and make it to broadcast made media impacts on the Gulf War minimal. This was accentuated by the short duration of the war. The deliberate actions of the government as well as the careful acts of military commanders who

still remembered Vietnam caused the media to become a voice of positive reinforcement rather than a questioning adversary. Complaints from journalists about the censorship may indicate they would have preferred to report as they had in Vietnam, but the government preferred the military to have full control of the situation. In this war, the media would not be given the chance to change the perceptions of the American public, through critical reporting, rather they would act as government informants assuring the public that this war was nothing like Vietnam.

Perhaps the greatest question in regards to the heavy censorship is whether or not the government's actions undermined the constitutional right of the press to report freely. While constitutional scholars will argue that information during war time can be tucked neatly into a "Clear and Present Danger" doctrine, where national security stands above free press, it must be challenged that some of the coverage that was censored, such as the arrival of caskets to the United States, would have done nothing but raised the alertness of the American public to the other, not so "clean" side of the war.

It has long been understood that "the general public [have] low levels of knowledge and incoherent systems of thinking...given such circumstances of knowledge and opinion, ...people are easily manipulated by the way message and images are communicated (Alger 40)." A government, trying to get over the stinging public reaction to Vietnam and the contradictions of American foreign policy today, feared the reactions of an openly informed public towards them. Thus, the American public suffered heavily during the Gulf War at the hands of government run media.

### *Live - CNN's War and Reporting in Real Time*

It must be accepted that the Gulf War was heavily censored, and in this respect was light years away from Vietnam in the sense of how it was covered. There are other developments, however, that made the Gulf War unique to war reporting. While both wars were heavily televised, the most drastic change between Vietnam and the Gulf War was the continuous live coverage present during the Gulf War. During Vietnam the lack of technology made it difficult for newsreels to make it on television in the United States in a timely manner. Many times coverage being aired was more than a week old. In the Gulf War advance satellite technology made it possible for the war to be broadcast live in “real time (Seib 107).”

In addition to the fact that television was showing live coverage, or same day coverage, the amount of television coverage was, at times, overwhelming. The American public had not been exposed to a story as large as the Gulf War for some time; their thirst for coverage led networks to produce more and more (Seib 51). Throughout the Gulf, build up coverage was intense, as well as lengthy. Many times nightly news programs devoted a large portion of their broadcast to various aspects of the Gulf “situation.” During the actual war, long periods of saturation coverage marked the news as well as special programs dedicated specifically to the war (Lewis 1).

Perhaps the most marked advance during the Gulf War was the emergence of cable television as a major player in news reporting. In 1980 the

inception of the Cable News Network (CNN) provided worldwide viewers twenty-four hour news coverage. The Gulf War was the first time this new form of television reporting was tested. From the moment American bombs began to fall on Baghdad and for a little more than two weeks after, CNN was the only American news agency reporting from inside Iraq. As a network dedicated solely to news, CNN's coverage was unique and completely redefined the concept of live television news (Stech 1).

CNN's ability to report "Live from Baghdad" gave them an edge that even the government did not have. As the only American agency, media or political, located in Iraq, the reports they sent over the airways were not only scrutinized by the American public, but the Bush Administration as well. The government relied heavily on the coverage because of the simple fact that government reports on future war decisions were not being produced fast enough to react to CNN. For example, government officials watched along side the American public live coverage of Iraq bombing Israel (Stech 1).

Another aspect of CNN that changed the nature of coverage and how coverage was viewed was the fact that CNN had 24-hour news cycles. It was possible for anyone to turn on the television and inevitably catch up on slices of the war within minutes. For the public this meant that viewing the war did not have to fit around the nightly news (Stech 3). For the government it meant that they had to constantly monitor what was happening on television. Pool reporting may have been working in Saudi Arabia, but once Iraq allowed CNN to report live, the government had to contend with coverage that may not have fit the type of war they wanted televised.

The introduction of constant news made it particularly hard for the government to keep constant tabs on reporting. Military commanders not only had to focus on the actual war during the Gulf, they also had to pay attention to the spin the media was placing on the conflict (Stech 8). CNN and “live war” allowed the American public to judge instantaneously, with no time for the government to do damage control first. As Americans saw more and more coverage, American policy would have to be reiterated in a manner in which the American public would approve and accept (Stech 11).

It could be assumed that with live television capability, the media could gain back some of their objectivity taken away by censorship. But, the open coverage was limited to only a small segment of the reporting field and the government rules written in network contracts, still applied even to live coverage. The location of the war made it nearly impossible for reporters to access combat; combat coverage would be left to the pools. In addition live coverage was often of military hardware, and the effects of American bombs on places such as Baghdad. The news then turned back to Pentagon video to explain how their technology worked, what a Smart Bomb was, and how a Patriot Missile could intercept a Scud. The Gulf War saw rare live coverage that contradicted government policies. The government had carefully orchestrated news management from the very onset, so network contracts and the “rules of coverage” still applied, even when CNN went live (Weimann 279).

Public reaction to saturation coverage of the Gulf War ranged from appreciation to apathy. CNN’s monopoly on coverage from Iraq forced networks to borrow coverage, so the same film was played repeatedly on all networks



(Weimann 280). Some Americans, knowing they could catch up with the war anytime, stopped relying solely on regularly scheduled news, instead flipping it on every once in a while to see what was new. Others watched all the time, becoming so saturated by continuous coverage at times they could forget that “movie-like” news was actual war. Both styles of viewing had dramatic effects on the lack public response to the war in general (“Economist” 1).

### *What Americans Were (Or Weren't) Seeing on Television*

When the nation is in crisis, often times there tends to be a “rally around the flag” affect. In times such as this, Presidential popularity is high and media coverage is positive (Hastedt 132). Positive media coverage tends to prompt the public to perceive that the actions of the government as “right” in all cases. In cases such as this, what the media is *not* saying is perhaps more important.

During the build up to the Gulf War, the media focused primarily on strategy and tactics. Like modern day election coverage, there was much said about the effectiveness of government strategy but little was mentioned as to the wisdom behind the entire policy in general. Any critical angle that would have pressed upon deeper questions was absent in the media until late November 1990 when Congressional Democrats first spoke out against the merits of an actual invasion (Mermin 79).

This trend was consistent with media trends that follow the opinions of Washington insiders when it comes to foreign policy. When key leaders speak up, the media pays attention. When they remain silent, the media generally remains

silent as well. After the war began, few in Washington questioned the President on his objectives; journalists focused on the ability of the President to execute his policy, closing their critical eye to the merits or demerits of a policy that leads a nation into war (Mermin 110).

In keeping with a focus of strategy rather than policy, the media framed the Gulf War in regards to U.S. technological superiority. The language used was bland military jargon that led to limited comprehension by the public. In addition the speed of television, especially that of CNN's continuous coverage focused on simplification through quick easy to handle sound bytes and video clips as well as repetition (Weimann 318). All of these factors made it possible for the public to watch the weapons of war do their job, but television did little to express the political climate and strategy behind why we were using those superior weapons in the first place.

As Americans watched the war on television, they were continuously bombarded with images, but unlike Vietnam, the images and the words that accompanied them distanced the viewers from the conflict rather than drawing them in. For months there was little to no critical media coverage, all the while the brutality of war was "normalized and even glamorized" by the constant saturation and lack of critical editorials by television anchors (Herman 8). The American public saw reporters on CNN reporting "from behind enemy lines, reporting on their own courage," we watched the movie of war play on, marveling at television technology that allowed us to see each Iraqi missile that was sent into Israel while cameras turned away from the U.S. bombing of Baghdad (Dykstra 1).

The television media also changed the commentary of their reports to draw the viewer away from destruction and brutality of war. Military phraseology, icons such as American flags and pictures of soldier's families wearing yellow ribbons were some of the tactics employed to give the American public a "glut of information and emotion, but a dearth of perspective and understanding (Greenburg 28)." Many terms were employed to distance the viewer from the effects of war. Terms such as collateral damage functioned to dehumanize the enemy, making it seem less real and less horrific (Greenburg 70).

Vietnam this was not. American television media continued throughout the war to produce programming free of blood, gore, and death. The reality of human suffering that is a central part of war was hidden behind carefully selected images, overlaid with carefully thought out commentary. The lack of combat coverage, thanks to the government pool system, forced networks to carry pictures of the "sleek instruments of war, the sliver jet fighters, bombers floating through the air like hawks playing in a summer breeze, powerful tanks treading through the desert sands. One had to view this with a mixture of pride, awe and admiration (Greenburg 33)." Americans were seeing a war, but they were not seeing the reality of war.

In the end, television viewers experienced the illusion of critical, objective news during the Gulf War. What they saw on their nightly news were images and live satellite transmissions served to "mask reality rather than shed light on what was actually happening (Seib 110)." Perhaps this is central to the fact that throughout the war the American public remained supportive of the actions of the Bush administration. Their perception was that this war, unlike Vietnam, was

just; this administration, unlike those during Vietnam, knew what they were doing.

### *Are The Media To Blame?*

The American public is generally not attuned to the details of politics outside the United States. Foreign affairs since before Vietnam has been an arena of politics left mostly to the politicians. However, in times of war, public perception of foreign affairs deeply impacts the opinions they hold for or against the government. The information that the public receives in regards to foreign affairs comes predominately from the media who act as a bridge between Presidential administrations and the American people. In the time leading up to and during a war, the theory of American democracy assumes the media would objectively present the conflict so that the public might come by enough understanding to individually and collectively determine if America is fighting a just war for the right reasons.

War as a national endeavor should not be taken lightly. In a democracy, the decision to go to war should be one taken not only by the government, but also by the people. In order for the public to make their decision on whether or not war is an acceptable solution, they must be well informed as to the issues surrounding the conflict. In a study done by The Center for the Study of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, researchers found that in regards to the Gulf War, the public was alarmingly misinformed about the

politics surrounding the conflict and many times had little to no opinion regarding the conflict.

When a survey of 250 random residents of the greater Denver, Colorado area were questioned about the history of the Middle East and the history behind the conflict with Iraq many of the respondents had difficulty answering. However, 81% were able to name the missile used to shoot down Iraqi Scud Missiles (the Patriot) and close to 80% were aware that Saddam Hussein was using chemical weapons against his own population (Lewis 5).

It is alarming that Americans knew the complexities of military hardware being used in the war; however only 2% were able to explain the reason Iraq had invaded Kuwait, the supposed leading cause to American involvement in the conflict (Lewis 4). Respondents also showed very little knowledge of worldwide affairs in general. When asked if the administration should invade nations whose leaders murder significant numbers of citizens (as Saddam had) 58% agreed this would be a good policy. "If this moral position were applied consistently, the US would have invaded many countries that the Administration had actually supported (Lewis 5)."

In the end, it is hard to place blame on the administration for presenting the public with a limited amount of knowledge; they were trying to garner support for a war, and it is not their job to present the public with an objective, balanced view of their war. Rather, it was the television media that failed to present a balanced view. It was the television media who continuously agreed to follow government procedures in reporting the war, who spent their resources on playing over and over film of missiles intercepting other missiles and who spent

very little time arguing the negative aspects of war, or the historical contradictions behind the Bush Administration's policy towards Iraq.

Some argue that the key reason coverage was so drastically different during the Gulf War than in Vietnam was due to the fact that since Vietnam the government had drastically adjusted the way it dealt with media coverage during wartime. The lessons they learned forced a shift in government policy, making everyone, from the President to military commanders media savvy. In contrast, the media never adjusted to these changes. They continue to report war, and go for the big story, but have yet learned to adjust they manner in which they report in order to gain a more objective outlook, as reporters were able to come by in the later years of Vietnam (PBS Newshour).

When analyzing coverage of the Gulf War, there is little argument that the American public was led through the war somewhat blindly. The media failed to give viewers a comprehensive account of all, good and bad, that was happening. The Administration kept to their policy and fed the media what it wanted broadcast, and somewhere along the line journalistic objectivity took a back seat to "patriotism" and an the attempt to move beyond the negative coverage associated with Vietnam.

The problem is that while the death and destruction of war will always remain, television media have now given us a choice to ignore, tune out and live our lives without having to turn on our televisions and view the brutal reality of war. In the end as was noted by journalist Jonathan Alter "the sad truth is that we [the media] covered the war but did not report it (Seib 57)."

### *Some Final Thoughts on the Gulf War*

During the Gulf War, the government set down media ground rules dictating what they would and would not report. The thinly veiled censorship present during the Gulf War begs us to question the constitutionality of the actions as well as the seemingly partisan nature of televised media in abiding with these rules. In regards to the constitutionality of censoring the press, the government has rapidly invoked the concept of “Clear and Present Danger” citing their constitutional right to prevent information flow during wartime if in fact that information could somehow compromise the safety of American military personnel and our own national security.

While there are some aspects of a war that should not be reported, such as the exact location of our troops, and reports on future plans for engagements, there is other information, casualty numbers and war atrocities that should never fall under restrictive government control. Just because some information does not cast favorable light on an Administration does not mean that it should never be reported.

In the years following Vietnam the government formulated an extensive “government and military-friendly” war-media policy that included the institution of the pool-reporting and censorship procedures mentioned earlier. The media, on the other hand, were not able to adjust their style of reporting to circumvent the changes imposed by the government in order to report in a more questioning, analytical and ultimately more objective manner.

Another key to the reason for the dramatic shift following Vietnam is that in the years following the Vietnam War, network executives, having discovered the massive profitability of television, became concerned about not reporting news that would “irritate” viewers. The thought of showing bloody, horrifying combat, even if it had been accessible during the Gulf War, did not appeal to network executives interested in maintaining a large base of viewership night after night.

In addition, all networks sought to present “breaking news.” The speed at which television worked during Vietnam was nothing compared to the speed of reporting during the Gulf War. In attempts to get the “best” story first, networks signed contracts with the government in exchange for access to the war front, essentially handing over their objectivity in search for better ratings.

By the end of the Gulf War, the public had received more televised reporting than any one previous event in history (Weiner 13). However, the media had become servants of official policy, managed into serving the war effort and presenting a war that “was not another Vietnam.” The obligatory role of the media to serve the informational needs of American democracy had been lost while they reported a great “victory” for American military and government forces.

In the end, it was the American public who lost out during the Gulf War. The lack of critical analysis towards American policy by the television media created a sense that the war was “right.” Iraq was the evil enemy and America had every obligation to go to war with them. Had the media not cared for profit, ratings and the comfort of their audiences, they may have been able to sway



public opinion towards the side of questioning rather than the side of blind patriotism for the American cause. However, television played into government hands, and reported as if they were the official spokesmen and spokeswoman of the American government. While coverage abounded, information was incessantly repetitive and lacked true depth. Any decision-making done by the American public was not based on wars' reality, rather on an illusion of something that was taken, unquestioningly as truth. The public was presented a mixture of support for military conflict, happy patriotic families of the American military forces, and a clean war, where the reality of human suffering brought on by American policy was hidden behind images of bombs falling in the night.

### *Does the American Public Care?*

We cannot blame the media entirely for their shift in coverage. There are many economic, cultural as well as political factors that play into this shift. What is most disturbing is that with an increase in television coverage, and a massive increasing in television's ability to be "everywhere" and supposedly "see everything," we have lost the objectivity that should define the role of the media in American society. This is the objectivity that is necessary to fully educate the public and allow democracy to function in its greatest sense.

While the government is a major player in the change in televised war reporting over the past half century, the role to the American public is also important. During the 1960s, the American public was invested in a war against communism that threatened the American way of life. When the Cold War ended

in the late 1980s the American public became much less concerned with world events. There was no longer an imminent threat from the Soviet Union, the United States was the sole superpower and there seemed little need for network producers and news anchors to keep a sharp focus on foreign policy (Ginsberg 1).

Following the Gulf War, the public had seen the power of the American military machine on television, played to perfection. A quick war, with few casualties presented positively to the American public, thus, following the end of the war, the interests of the American public turned inward, as they often do following a foray into international politics. Why should the every day individual worry about what was happening on the other side of the world? We had defeated communism. We had defeated Saddam Hussein. According to the lack of international affairs coverage on television, there was little left to worry about on a daily basis.

The television media failed to objectively present the Gulf War to the American public, but it could be said that part of the reason they did not proceed with more in depth reporting, and analysis was because the American public was not responsive to this type of coverage. They seemed to lack concern for any misdoings of the government, at times seem to lack understanding of the reality of war at all, and from a television market and financial standpoint they were not “buying it.”

The cocoon of America protects the public from acknowledging the horrors of a war- torn world around us. Vietnam had a deep influence on the sub - consciousness of the American public. We do not want to see body bags coming home. We do not want to know that death and destruction, like that we once

viewed on our television sets, occurs more regularly than we admit. Human nature dictates us to seek safety and comfort. Television during the Gulf War gave us this safety. We did not see death. We did not have to acknowledge the horror that war imposes on individual lives. We were able to accept war because it was far away, fought by machines, and we saw nothing wrong - no evil American action, nothing that would cause us to question our government and cause us to question our own trust in our leadership.

### **Televised War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### *Introduction – The Years Following The Gulf War*

In the years following the Gulf War prosperous economic growth in the United States, coupled with a sense of victory over Cold War adversaries left the American public as well as the media content to retreat into a world filled with domestic issues and very little media attention to foreign policy. The 1990s were not without foreign conflict. American involvement in Somalia in 1992, Haiti in 1994, and ongoing tensions in the Balkan Republics of Bosnia and Serbia brought into question some government military action. This was particularly true in the case of Somalia. However, journalists seemed content in most situations to report the line fed to them by Washington officials, accepting government policy and reasoning for foreign affairs, much as they had done during the Gulf War (Mermin 145).

A high level of critical debate was simply lacking. Press coverage of foreign affairs following the Gulf War did little to raise the awareness level of ordinary Americans to the world outside the United States. The picture of international affairs painted by the press, during the 1990s, seemed to say that third world conflicts and conflict brought on by the collapse of Cold War communism were worth acknowledgement but not in depth analysis, if there was no full scale American military intervention (Ginsburg 1). The lack of public knowledge concerning forces of conflict brewing outside the United States would prove a grave oversight for the American government, the American public, and would usher in a new era for television media on the morning of September 11, 2001.

#### *9-11-01: A New Era for Television*

When America came under attack on of September 11, 2001, television's role in our society changed drastically. Never before had a single event so shocked our nation; never before had the American public become so reliant on their televisions for news; and never before had television covered an attack on America as it was happening. As the President watched the day's events unfold on CNN, Americans remained glued to their televisions for new, for answers, and for comfort. Television was a way, for many viewers, to attach themselves to others like themselves who were confused, and questioning.

The television media covered the events of 9-11 live, for days and weeks afterwards they continued non-stop coverage as a country mourned the loss, and questioned the reason while a collective anger began to build. Television provided

information about the hijackers, the countries they were from, the politics of the Middle East, and the religious affiliations of those who had attacked our country. Overnight the mass media gave the American public a history lesson in world affairs. American's quickly learned about Muslim fundamentalism in the third world as well as in the United States; they located Afghanistan on a map, they learned there were places outside our borders where there existed a hatred of all things American, and they learned how much of the third world had been living while we had remained in our cocoon.

While at times television coverage was chaotic and explanations concerning the reasoning behind the attacks lacked depth, correspondents accepted the job as educator of the American public after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Television seemed to have been made for events like 9-11, a unifier, a teacher, a companion and ultimately a source from which Americans learned how our government would respond and how they as individuals should respond to this ultimate shock.

On September 11<sup>th</sup> the power of television was shown in full force. It pulled everyday Americans together, while simultaneously educating them on the darker truths of the outside world. Today three major 24-hour news networks: CNN, FOX News, and MSNBC, keep us in constant information mode if we chose. We have the ability to see events as they unfold to a degree that no one has ever experienced before. Much of the nation has become glued to breaking news updates, headline tickers and nightly news reports.

In the days following the attack on America, President Bush addressed the nation citing a firm resolve that was embodied in all Americans. He called for

support and understanding as we took on a “new kind of war” - one that would not end until we had “stamped out terrorism” and regained security in our homeland (‘State of the Union’ January 2002). Television continued, as the months went on, to report on this “new war.” Foreign affairs coverage increased dramatically as the continuing lessons of 9-11 played out on television screens nightly. America embraced a sense of deep Patriotism. It was this sense of patriotism and unwavering support for our President as he navigated this new world that made it nearly impossible to find any criticism of foreign affairs policy in the television press following 9-11.

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In this final section, I will concentrate specifically on analyzing the changes the television media has undergone reporting the current war with Iraq. However, we cannot forget that the war in Afghanistan goes on. Much like Grenada and Panama in the 1980s, the press has been largely shut out of this war. Reporters that have chosen to cover the conflict have been censored and kept away from combat operations (Jensen A15).

While many will applaud the new style of media coverage in Iraq, we must at least recognize there is a concurrent media failure to report the war in Afghanistan. The “War against Terror” that began on September 11, 2001. The failure to report the continued military struggles in Afghanistan may be attributed both to lack of media access to the war as well as lack of public want to criticize anything the government is doing to combat terrorism in a post-

September 11<sup>th</sup> world. No matter the case, the difference in media coverage of two current wars is troubling and worth noting.

*The Government, Television and War: Summer 2002-Winter 2003*

Today, not less than two years following the greatest attack on America in history we are involved in war, not with those who committed the attack against the United States but with the nation of Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Like the Gulf War twelve years ago, this war has desert combat, swift, successful fighting, minimum American casualties and a short duration, just as promised by American government officials. While it is impossible to say today what the future will bring for the United States and for the nation of Iraq, U.S. involvement in this war may be the result of one of the greatest political propaganda victories of all time. Television media play a large, and unsettling role in that success.

Following September 11<sup>th</sup>, President Bush promised to rid the world of terrorism. Networks showed images of a defiant Bush multiple times a day, week after week as the “war on terror” began. Early on, Bush singled out three nations, Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an “axis of evil” from which, according to the American government, terror originated (‘State of the Union’ January 2002). If one listened to the President and watched television cover these developments, one would be led to believe these regimes were nearly responsible for the attacks on America. During this initial period, any mainstream newsperson would be hard pressed to report anything other than support for America.

Moving away from the initial period of mourning, one might expect a critical angle to seep back into the media. It has always been the nature of a free press to question, especially when American lives, beliefs and values are at stake. There have been plenty of opportunities for the media to “question” things such as the connections between Iraq, Iran, North Korea and the nineteen terrorists who led us to where we are today. However, there has yet to be any real public critical analysis, put forth by the media, of the historical reasons behind the hatred of America that led to the attacks. There has yet to be any analysis of American involvement in the Middle East that may have led to unrest. There has yet to be any real analysis of America’s history with regimes like Iraq, Iran and other so-called supporters of terrorism. The American public has had minimal exposure in the past months to America’s historic support for many of the countries we find ourselves in conflict with today (Hastedt 41).

When President Bush first began to single out Iraq in the summer of 2002 as a cradle of terrorism, the mass media covered the movement of troops to the region, war games being held in Qatar, and commented on the Gulf War. As United Nations inspectors entered Iraq to search for weapons of mass destruction, the television media covered their day-to-day progress, as well as the diplomatic negotiations among members of the United Nations. President Bush continued to push for a deadline of inspections, sighting the need for Iraq to disarm, in the interest of international peace, in the interest of American national security. Inspections went on, and in the United States, the media watched the troop build up reporting on events as they were happening rather than the causes of the events themselves.



Talk about a possible war began to permeate Sunday political talk shows and nightly news programs in the summer of 2002. President Bush continued to express his concern that Iraq would use their weapons of mass destruction. As the diplomatic debate heated up, President Bush presented the government's theory that Iraq harbored terrorists to the United Nations ('President's Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly' September 2002). The media immediately picked up on this carefully constructed connection. Rather rapidly, Iraq went from being a nation with a dangerous regime to a nation who might soon strike against the United States and her interests in a terrorist manner.

All this time, the American media were in a position to question the connection the President seemed to be making between weapons inspections and the 9-11 terrorist attacks, yet they did not. They could have questioned the President's conviction that our most pressing threat was Iraq by substantially questioning the ongoing war in Afghanistan, mounting tensions with North Korea or the development of a nuclear reactor in Iran, yet they did not. During the year following 9-11 television gave American's much of what they wanted to hear. A mixture of patriotism continued to infuse network news, while reporters reassured an uneasy American public how to prepare for possible terrorist attacks, if they were to occur, all the while assuring them that the American government had successfully disabled the power structure of those terrorists responsible for 9-11.

Television reporting appeared to be, safe and non-provocative, especially when it came to foreign affairs. The television media covered the struggle to solve the conflict in the Middle East with diplomatic means as if it were a sporting

event, play-by-play, move by move. Networks flashed live to United Nations debates and correspondents stationed in France, Germany and Russia reporting on lost support by our once strong allies. Rarely did commentary appear in these reports explaining why they did not support us, or why war was not the best solution for so many. The media simply failed to critically assess the situation.

Thus, the general American public watching and waiting for war, has gone into the current conflict with little understanding of the political ramifications of our actions; the public has little appreciation for the historical significance of the President's pre-emptive strike on a nation that did not outwardly threaten us; it has little understanding of anything, other than the belief, accentuated by months of media coverage, that Iraq is somehow related to 9-11 and we will not be safe until Saddam is once and for all defeated. The government has successfully used terrorism to go to war with Iraq. The media accepted this explanation and fed it to the American public, who in turn supported the President's war while the world around them did not. Support for the current war can be attributed to government policy carefully constructed to use post September 11<sup>th</sup> patriotism and American anger and a supportive insufficiently critical media to achieve governmental and military objectives.

The media, while they may not have been able to prevent the current war, have failed to objectively present the American public with facts and critical political analysis of the causes and affects of this new war. As in the first Gulf War, the media today has not provided Americans the information they need to fully understand this current conflict. Without a proper information base, the public has lost ability to speak out about the war in a critical manner that would

catch the attention of government officials. Even current anti-war protests seem disjointed and lacking a cohesive reasoning behind outspoken objections to war. With hardly any media coverage focused on those against the current war, the protest movement is nothing like those government officials faced during Vietnam, where media coverage was present and during the later years of the war, supportive.

Never has it been more important for the American public to fully understand the actions of our government. We have entered a new era of foreign policy, for which there is no past precedent. Ironically the nation would be stronger if the press could recognize its ability to report current policy objectively, freely and without government spin. The American public deserves such information, deserves to formulate opinions based on facts, so that they might actively participate in our democracy.

### **War with Iraq – March 2003**

*\*\* Theory in the following section is based predominantly on current media coverage derived from CNN's coverage of the war in Iraq from March 19, 2003 thru April 19, 2003\*\**

Today's war may, in time, give us much insight as to the continuing evolution of war reporting and televised war. The following analysis is by no means complete. The continuing war and nature of television to shift daily in its style of reporting make a full analysis of the current conflict impossible. It will be years before the full impact of today's coverage will be known. Nonetheless, the

following sections summarize my insight, three weeks into war as to the direction media coverage seems to be taking. In addition my conclusion will address today's media coverage in relationship to the Gulf War and Vietnam and how it measures up to the concept of a democratic free press in times of American war.

### *Embedding*

Perhaps the most noticeable change in media coverage in the current war is the creation of a system of "embedding" reporters with troop units. This new system has replaced the pool system used in the Gulf War and at first glance seems to be a vast improvement. Reporters have been allowed full access to the units they cover, living with them as they fight this war. Images we watch on television programs have brought home some of the reality in this war - the combat, the struggles of American servicemen and women, and a feeling of charging through the desert.

At the onset of the war there are close to 500 correspondents from print, photo, and televised media embedded with both American and British Divisions. Nearly half of the reporters received "media boot camp" training before the war in preparation for combat and close to 20% of the journalists are from international media outlets, a huge increase from the Gulf War which saw hardly any foreign press coverage ("News Night" March 20, 2003).

The rules facing the embedded journalists are still governed by the Pentagon. While they have the freedom to film combat and report live the actions of their assigned units, they are restricted in giving away current and future

maneuvers and initial casualty numbers. Television and photojournalists are encouraged to exercise caution when showing graphic images such as wounded soldiers ([www.defenselink.mil/news/feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf)), a clear difference that prevents the type of visually strong images that shaped public opinion during the Vietnam War from making it onto television today.

That said, when watching embed reports, the closeness of the fighting and the reality of what American forces are facing during war is much clearer than any conflict Americans have seen on television post-Vietnam. For the American population under the age of forty Vietnam is not part of their television experience, thus there is little frame of reference when it comes to combat imagery on television. Today's television reports are drastically different in visual response when compared to the fuzzy Department of Defense combat videos aired during the first Gulf War. As can be expected Americans, over the first few weeks of this war, have been amazed at the coverage, the perceived access of the troops and the ability for television to get close and personal battle after battle. At times even the media themselves seem awe struck as anchors sit back and watch the realities of war along with the American public.

The decision by the Bush Administration to embed reporters into troop units stemmed partly from criticism about inadequate access exposed by the press following the Gulf War and during the recent/ongoing war in Afghanistan. It was also a decision based on the thought that "by bringing the astonishing new technology of the press right up to the front lines" television coverage "would show America and the world that this was a war of "liberation" and not conquest ("News Night" March 25, 2003)."

So far, we have seen the success of combat coverage as well as the downsides that embedding may produce. The massive flow of information onto our television screens is not without consequences. The most noticeable consequence early on is that by watching separate reports day after day, hour by hour, the image of the war is easily manipulated by the tone the reporter sets. Sometimes the war is going well, other times we are failing in our objectives. Emotions are dependent on which regiment the reporter who is giving the report at that time ("News Night" March 25, 2003).

In addition to a constant wave of emotion as to how the war is going, stories such as the capture of American soldiers, or the surrender of Iraqis become major incidences, or "events" on television, due to the simple fact that viewers at home can see their faces and hear their voices. The ability for embeds to give combat a human side that was lacking during much of the Gulf War, has made them extremely powerful as an influence of public perception about the war.

### *The Positive Side of Embedding*

In the first days of the war, embedding has been called a new era in television journalism. Americans have become glued to their television sets, watching the war unfold on the front lines. They feel the frustrations along with the victories and at times, the boredom of sitting and waiting for whatever comes next.

In the first days of the war, the Project for Excellence in Journalism studied over 40 hours of coverage from major networks including; ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox. They found that nearly two thirds of the stories during the initial onset of the war were reported by embedded journalists, and were aired live as well as unedited. Nearly 80% of stories were reported by the individual reporters, without interviews and about 50% of the reporters described or showed combat action (Bauder C9).

Both media and government alike have consistently praised the ability for these reporters to report without restriction as action is occurring. Jack Fuller, President of the Tribune Publishing Company and Vietnam veteran wrote that, “war coverage from embedded reporters is more powerful than any combat coverage has ever been (Bauder C9).” Embedding, for many, appears to be the answer to the censorship that plagued television during the Gulf War, all the while maintaining a positive relationship between those crafting the war, those fighting the war and those reporting it.

While early indications give positive reinforcement to the embedding system, the study done by the Project for Excellence in Journalism also found that while most stories have been aired live, uncensored and free from editing, there remains very little graphic depiction of death or injury caused by combat or the effects of combat on the civilian populations of Iraq (Bauder C9). These along with several other factors have led some to argue the not so wonderful side to this new media system of war reporting.

## *The Negative Aspects of Embedding*

Thus far, there are two main arguments against the merits of the embedding system. The first is that embedded press, under the supervision of the Pentagon and the constant care of military personnel cannot be free to report objectively from the front lines. The second argues that while embedded reports may in fact give us a slice of war, they only give us a mere slice, and the trend to base much of daily television coverage around embedded reports is leaving viewers with a warped view of the war rather than a big picture understanding of the situation.

In regards to the first argument, as this paper has argued, as have countless media scholars and members of the press, American citizens need an information source, free from government control, from which they can gain critical information necessary to participate in the democratic process, to make informed decisions. Journalism professor Robert Jensen argues that “citizens in a democracy should be able to expect from their journalists; a trustworthy source of facts gathered independently; historical, political and social context to help make sense of the facts; and the widest possible range of option so that people might test their own conclusions against alternate ones (Jensen A18).”

In this new war, embeds are under constant surveillance from the Pentagon as well as bound to their own units. Attempts to secure transportation to report in places other than those where their unit is located are grounds to be sent home (Jensen A18). On top of continued government restrictions that can be masked on the surface with incredible footage, reporters are dependent on those



whom they are reporting. Their safety and their lives are dependent on the units with which they are embedded. This leads to question why someone would report negatively or even somewhat objectively about military actions, when they must wake up next to those they are reporting about on a day-to-day basis.

Looking at coverage so far, embedded reporters have concentrated much on human-interest stories and high tech weaponry. There has been some coverage of the chaos of combat but it has not been bloody or graphic. True objective reporting has not appeared, as countless reports come to our television screens from grateful reporters who have been “saved” from injury or death by the “bravest of all troops” who they are lucky enough to be allowed the privilege to ride alongside in battle. Yes, embedding gives us insight we have not seen in war reporting since Vietnam, but “the context and analysis necessary to turn facts into real understanding is largely missing, especially from television media (Jensen A18).” To this extent embedding has failed to provide the American public an objective view of the war.

It is hard to believe there will be any critical reporting from those embedded with American troops. Critical analysis is left to anchors reporting from home. Yet we have not seen any real analysis from nightly news anchors. They seem as caught up in watching embeds as the ordinary American does. This works well for a government seeking to keep questions regarding policy, civilian casualties, methods of warfare, and the like out of public scrutiny. It does not bode well for the American public obtaining an objective factual basis from which they can determine the merits or demerits of this war.

In regards to the argument that reporters can only report a small slice of a larger picture, embeds are only able to show a mere fraction of war's reality. Journalist Dante Chinni has argued that "the closer to the action...the more confusing [the report] (Chinni 1)." We have established that watching embeds is fascinating for an American public who has either never seen anything close to the type of wartime footage we are now seeing or has not seen it since Vietnam. However, depending on the time of day, network and actual embedded reporter you are watching, your impression of the war can be drastically different.

Embedding is successful in the sense that it allows us to see the hardships of war and the difficulties that American servicemen and women go through on a daily basis for the safety of our nation. However, Chinni uses football as an accurate metaphor for embedding. He states: "It's long been said that football is a metaphor for war. Teams push through enemy territory, try to break through defensive lines, throw 'the bomb'. But ironically, in a postmodern age, football game coverage may be the best metaphor for war coverage. Watching war coverage by simply watching embedded reporters is like trying to figure out what's going on in a game by watching the action through the camera isolated on one player...its nearly impossible (Chinni 2)."

The point of this argument stems from conflicting reports early on in the war that had troops moving in one direction, then another, then not at all. All the reports were perceived to have some truth to them depending on where embeds were located. As the war has progressed, we have seen days when the war seems optimistic, when embeds in the front divisions successfully drive through central

Iraq, days when it's less optimistic, when reporters in other divisions encounter tough resistance.

### *One Last Thought on Embedding*

In conclusion, embedding has both its positive and negative effects. It is unfair to blame the individual journalists who are risking their lives as embeds for the lack of critical analysis. They are simply doing the best job they can in a high stress, highly dangerous situation. Embeds, by no means, have the ability to give a "big picture" view of the war from their location within military units constantly on the move in under fire. It must be understood by both television reporters well as the American public, that the only successful way to report the war in "big picture" sense, is to supplement the reports from those embedded with critical reporting done by those reporters at home who have the ability to tie the pieces together.

There must also be reporting that questions what is going on outside the reaches of American journalism. What type of war is being fought off camera, out of reach of embedding reporters under the watch of the government and their military commanders? If one watches Arab television one will get a very different view of the war. Yet, the American public has little access to the "alternate" view of the war. In addition, if they believe what they are seeing on American television, they have little reason to seek out alternate sources.

As far as media access goes, this war is light years ahead of the Gulf War. The access reporters have to combat is unprecedented in this history of televised

war. The style of reporting is still not objective, and is still much more controlled than it ever was during the Vietnam years. Critical analysis present during Vietnam still eludes the American public who watch television war. Embedding can pose some interesting questions regarding the ability of reporters to remain objective rather than act as an arm of the government. There will be arguments in the months and years to come as to the benefits as well as the downsides to the embedding system. For now, it has given us a new way to view war, and we must recognize both its benefits and its limitations.

### **Iraq – The Role of Television**

#### *Criticism in the Press*

In today's war, television is a force more powerful than ever. The embedding process has brought the American public closer to combat than they have ever been. However, it is not only embeds who are reporting the war, there are countless anchors, analysts and more than ever, former military commanders who sit behind the desks at network head quarters. They comment on what is occurring, and predict what will happen in the future. They represent the largest gathering of news sources reporting on one war, ever. News is a 24-hour business, incessant, redundant and at times simply overwhelming.

In the first weeks of the war with Iraq, the most noticeable characteristics of this new war in the media are the speed at which it is occurring on the television screen and the amount of coverage networks are committing to the

war. Anytime of day, one can turn on the television and find war coverage. On networks not covering the war full time, there are hourly updates. One might think that with the amount of coverage there would be a considerable amount of analysis - political, theoretical and editorial from the anchors. However, much of the coverage focus's on the entertainment value of television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. War coverage is set to music, highlighted by flashy graphics. As far as critical analysis goes, there has been very little.

When the war first started, CNN anchor Aaron Brown commented as the first bombs fell that the questioning war commentary needed to fall to the wayside for it was "now time to support our troops ("News Night" March 19, 2003)." This is worrisome, when anchors abandon critical commentary for patriotism. One might argue that in the days that have followed there has been plenty of criticism. I agree, there has been plenty of criticism - of the war plan and military strategy. Criticism, that while interesting at times, does nothing to inform the public as to the reasoning behind the war and whether we should be there in the first place.

Any criticism of military strategy comes easier in this war due partly to the fact there is a constant source of information about what is occurring on the front lines from embeds. The ability for them to report live, and the ability of television to show continued coverage at a rapid rate makes even small blunders in military movement, or unexpected changes in military planning easy to criticize by the press. Like election coverage, coverage of this war has been predominately based on the strategy of the war. When there is a mishap in the strategy; there is plenty on which to comment.

In addition to criticism of war planning, the anticipation that built in the press during the weeks leading up to the war, has caused the media to flounder a bit. Reporters were sent to the Middle East beginning as far back as this fall, to report on the troops, and a kind of excitement flowed from television screens. Once the war began, the media had given the public an impression this war would be quick, simple, and a military cakewalk, as had been promised by the governmental officials planning the war. As the first days went by, the press was forced to “pull back and try and correct or balance some of those earlier, more optimistic predications (Howard Kurtz on “News Night” March 26, 2003).”

Nearly a month has passed since the beginning of the war. Only time will tell if the speed of the American military to overtake Southern Iraq and move so quickly into Baghdad may yet be one of the most successful military campaigns in history. However, the success of television to truly question all aspects of the war has no doubt failed in this short time.

### *Graphic Images in Today's War*

In the flurry of constant images that appear on our television screens, noticeably absent have been images of those wounded or killed in combat. Since the images of dead American and Vietnamese were first sent home during the Vietnam War, there has been a tendency in the press, particularly the television press, to shy away from horrors such as those depicted during that war. Many argue that the American public is just not accepting of graphic war images, and there is no need to cause undue stress to the everyday American by showing

American or Iraqi dead on the television screen. Some argue that Americans can understand the realities of war, without having to see dead or badly wounded bodies of soldiers and non-combatants in front of them. I disagree.

I believe that there is a level of respect when it comes to showing dead or wounded on television, that showing faces of American soldiers killed in action is unnecessary, that there must always be a level of reverence for those who have died. However, I do not believe that television should shy away from showing the horrible reality of war. "Channel surf from Britain's BBC to Germany's ZDF...and one finds...accounts...accompanied by graphic photos of the dead and dying that would never appear in U.S [television] outlets (Cava 1D)." America has become very good, in the years since Vietnam, at "keeping the more unpleasant and incorrect images off our radar screens (Burr N6)." This concept has both political and network marketing purposes. For networks, they do not show what the everyday American doesn't want to see, from a political standpoint we don't see what they don't want us to see.

By ignoring this reality, the American public has become blind to a side of war that should actively be sought out. If one is to accept and support a war, one should also accept the reality of death and destruction that accompanies it. There are possible ways for television to show the brutality of war to the American public. In today's world, everyday television is often more highly saturated with death, and graphic violence. From CBS to NBC to FOX on any given night and your "favorite" shows give a healthy dosage of death and graphic, blood soaked injury.

Today, the American public is much more accustomed to graphic images than they were a generation ago. During Vietnam the inclusion of graphic images the public was not used on nightly news broadcasts prompted a more questioning public; a more questioning public in turn fueled a more critical media. The press was freed to report more objectively on the war, partly by a public willing to accept images depicting the most graphic reality of war.

Today, I argue, that perhaps the only way to get across to the everyday American the true horrors of war is to show more graphic representations on television. If shockingly graphic images were able to cause public outcry during Vietnam, it may be true today as well. If images such as dead bodies can force a viewer to stop and take a second to question “why” during wartime, television is succeeding in some small sense to prompt its viewers to take a more active role in the war. It may not be pretty, it may not be neat and fit into the government’s ideal image of a “clean war” but graphic images may need to come back to the television screens if the violence that is occurring in Iraq affecting both individual soldiers and Iraqi citizens is to be fully understood by the television viewing American public.

### *The Role of the Correspondent to Remain Objective*

We have established a theory that it is most important for a journalist to remain as objective as possible during wartime. There are times when government censorship takes control and correspondents still have the ability to report as objectively as possible. Media scholar Keith Woods argues that the



simplest way for today's television correspondents to remain objective in face of government-controlled reports is to maintain objective language (Woods 1). Rather than give into military terms such as "campaign," "collateral damage" and "attempted decapitation strike" they could simply use the true meaning of such words: "war," "civilian casualties" and "attempted assassination".

When correspondents unquestioningly adopt the "safe" language of military jargon, and "take away the quotation marks that tell us it is someone else's language" (Woods 2) then the media aid the government in desensitizing human life and sacrifice. During wartime, objectivity can be achieved - reporting simply needs to be clear, accurate and precise. Correspondents need to describe what is happening and then anchors need to take this a step further by critically analyzing those actions that have brought our military to where they are. They must question the deeper meaning of the war itself, not just the strategy of the missions. In the end, reporting such as this would fulfill the role of a free press in American democracy and give the American public an understanding of war beyond government-based explanations.

### **Objective Success in Televised War**

In conclusion, this current war has not been successful in shedding the government controls of the Gulf War, nor has it been successful in regaining a sense of objective reporting that has been missing in televised war since Vietnam. While the institution of the embedding system has allowed for a change in coverage style, the television media have continued to report the events and

results of the war, rather than the causes and possible political implications. There remains a lack of critical analysis from which the American public can gain a base of objective information as to reasoning behind the war. With that, there remains an inability for the American public to make informed democratic decisions concerning the current conflict. The promising outlook in regards to objective reporting that followed the Gulf War has not been realized.

Vietnam remains the most objectively televised war and the only war where a majority of the American public truly questioned the actions of the leadership. Since Vietnam objective reporting has been in a decline. The Gulf War was the most censored of the three wars, however, media coverage of the current conflict is most troubling. After the Gulf War, the media voiced their anger at the censorship and restrictions on their ability to fully report the war. In the thirteen years since that time, the media have done little to change their style of reporting. Even after the government attempted to “fix” the censorship problems through the institution of embedding the media remain complacent and largely uncritical of government actions and policy. Today, more than ever, war reporting is focused on flashy technology, and images that will not provoke viewing audiences into dissent.

The television media play an enormous role in the shaping, conceptualizing and explaining of war in American society. They have the ability to work beyond the scope of government control; it is in their very nature of a free press to do so. Recent conflicts should not cement the role of the television media as a voice of the government during wartime, and the media should not accept

this role in future conflicts. A new era of foreign policy is being shaped with today's war; a new era of wartime television coverage must follow.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "To announce there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public." In times of war, the media need to fulfill their constitutional obligation to present information that will engage the American public to formulate opinions that might dictate future democratic decisions. The media cannot shrink from their responsibility, allowing the government to dictate the tone, outcome and emotions of war.

For American democracy to truly function in its full capacity, the press must reestablish their role as a force that can drive political opinion and democratic decision-making. Likewise, the American public needs to accept uncensored, objective press reporting in times of national crisis. There should never be a cocoon of safety in which to hide away from the truth of war. The American public must embrace becoming informed about the roots of any government policy that drives us to war as well as the manner in which television media explain it - even if it forces us upon the realities of war - death, and destruction as well as the political manipulations of our elected leaders, as it did during the Vietnam War.

None should ever accept government explained war as the only solution. Unquestioning acceptance, by television media as well as the public, shows complacency and lack of attention. Democracy was never meant to be complacent, it was meant to create tension between leaders and their public,

always striving to find solutions agreed upon by informed and educated masses. Anything less than objective, informative, critical media during wartime, should never be tolerated so long as the American public continues to want an active role in the democratic process.

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*\*Information from the Following Program comes from Personal Notes taken on the date the program aired\**

*Full transcripts can be found at: <http://www.cnn.com/transcripts/newsnight/>*

CNN Coverage of War with Iraq "News Night with Aaron Brown"  
March 19, 2003, 10pm

CNN Coverage of War with Iraq "News Night with Aaron Brown"  
March 20, 2003, 10pm

CNN Coverage of War with Iraq "News Night with Aaron Brown"  
March 25, 2003, 10pm

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Kathleen Sprague was born in Bangor, Maine on October 16, 1980. She was raised in Bangor and graduated from Bangor High School in 1999. Majoring in Political Science she has a Minor in Economics. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Pi Sigma Alpha and Omicron Delta Epsilon. While at the University of Maine she has worked as a Student Orientation Leader, a Peer Mentor for the ACE Program and served as a site leader for Alternative Spring Break.

Upon graduation, Kathleen plans to continue her academic studies pursuing a Masters Degree in Political Science at Villanova University.